



Labour in British East Africa.

Is it “SYNONYMOUS WITH SLAVERY?”

(Lord Cromer.)

Memorial to Lord Milner challenging the following main features:—

- (1) Administrative liability to provide native labour for private employers.
- (2) Administrative “advice” that labourers should work for White settlers.
- (3) Increase in forced labour.
- (4) Recruitment from the Mandated Colonies.

TO THE RT. HON. VISCOUNT MILNER, ETC.

MY LORD,—The Committee of this Society has now been able to give full consideration to the question of compulsory labour in East Africa in the light of available documents, including Memoranda from the Missionary Societies and others. We have also had the advantage of discussing the situation with Sir Edward Northey, and beg leave now to submit certain views for the consideration of His Majesty's Government.

We understand that there are two main proposals:—

(a) “Advice” is to be given administratively to the Native Tribes that their young men should come out of their Reserves to work for private employers. Native Chiefs in the pay of the Government are to be subjected to administrative displeasure unless they are useful in this direction.

(b) Compulsory labour for public works is to be allowed to be demanded up to a maximum of 60 days per annum, that is to say, natives are to be liable to be called on to spend one fifth of their working days in meeting this form of taxation alone.

The Society holds that the rightful position for a Government is that of saying that so long as the subject discharges his liability to the State, it is no concern of the Administration where or for whom that subject labours, but at the same time the Committee has always supported the attitude adopted by the late Lord Cromer so far as backward countries are concerned, as set forth in the following passage :—

“ We reluctantly admit the necessity of compulsory labour in certain cases, and we do not stigmatise as slavery such labour when, under all possible safeguards against the occurrence of abuses, it is employed for indispensable and recognised purposes of public utility. On the other hand, we regard the system, when employed for private profit, as wholly unjustifiable, and as synonymous with slavery.”

The policy adopted in Nigeria is also, we submit, more consonant with British ideals, whilst the safeguards provided for the protection of the labourer, and the restrictions upon the employment of immigrant labour, are the constant concern of the Government. Sir Frederick Lugard, in his Report Cmd. 468, writes :—

“ It is well that employers of labour, whether on the minefields or elsewhere, should realise two important facts in regard to labour. First, that the Government policy, being radically opposed to coercion in any form, even for works of such urgency and importance to the country as railways and roads, will not employ it in order to procure labour for private undertakings. Employers must, therefore, make the conditions of service sufficiently attractive to secure the labourers they need. To effect this, high wages are not necessary, and they are to be deprecated. An employer who pays more than the standard wage does an injury to the development of the country. Labour will be secured only by kind and fair treatment, decent hutments, the entire absence of blows and rough usage, and the facilities already described.”

In the opinion of our Committee the foregoing passage sets forth sound administrative policy, in so far as coercion is concerned, which is in no sense vitiated by the fact that for a few months friendly pressure was exerted upon the Tribal Chiefs, in order to give a start to the current of free labour.

The Society has further held that forced labour in *any* form should only be exacted with the greatest reluctance and under strict safeguards, whilst administrative effort should be unceasingly directed towards its total supersession. The Committee views the present proposals with serious concern, on account of their reactionary tendency. Similar methods, in their application by the Germans in their former African Colonies, were held up in British publications as an illustration of their unfitness to be allowed to retain such Colonies, whilst even in British Government documents the late German Administration was strongly censured for subjecting the Natives to forced labour.

In the White Book (No. 20) on Forced Labour, published in 1909, the maximum of East African exactions reported on as then in operation in Uganda, did not exceed one month per annum, and it is, in our opinion,

most regrettable to find that instead of the administration progressing towards the complete abolition of these demands, the period of liability is to be doubled.

Further, the safeguards under which the *corvée* is to be exacted appear in this case to be quite inadequate, and whilst recording our protest against the system, and our belief that it cannot fail to lead to abuse, we beg leave to submit for the consideration of His Majesty's Government some of the safeguards which have hitherto been regarded as essential to most schemes of Government *corvée* :—

(1) That the *Corvée* should be a liability without distinction of race, and essentially a substitute for taxation ; there is nothing more deplorable in the idleness of an African than in the idleness of an Indian or White immigrant.

(2) That every person liable to the *Corvée* should possess the right of commutation, *i.e.*, that by the payment of a tax he can always commute the labour demand.

(3) That no person should be compelled to labour so far from his home as to render difficult a frequent return to his family without any charge to himself. A breach of this safeguard has invariably led to grave moral trouble and to innumerable desertions. Where labour conditions are satisfactory, an advantage accrues because a contented native labourer is always the best recruiting agent, and by this means a free current of labour is set up which should ultimately render compulsion unnecessary.

We beg leave to enquire whether all these safeguards will be incorporated in the Government proposals for exacting compulsory labour for public works ; and if not, what safeguards are to be introduced ?

The Committee of this Society would at the same time record its strongest protest against the application of administrative pressure (by any form of compulsion or penalty) for the purpose of procuring labour for private interests. Whilst invitation and encouragement to work are desirable, and all possible arrangements for assisting employers to find labour, and labourers employers, should be developed, the Committee holds that any form of compulsion is a clear departure from justifiable administrative practice. It clearly involves the State as an auxiliary in those processes of exploitation, any intention of complicity in which has repeatedly been disclaimed and repudiated by His Majesty's Government, and which Lord Cromer, as quoted above, describes as "synonymous with slavery."

Whilst recording this protest we beg to point out that nothing in the material before us indicates the terms of contract under which the labourers are to be engaged, either as regards the minimum of wages, periods of engagement, or the obligations of the employer.

Moreover, there does not appear to be any system for licensing the Recruiting Agents, an essential safeguard in the hands of the Government for the control of such Agents.

We have noted with satisfaction that in his speech upon the Colonial Office Vote, Lieut.-Colonel Amery said that the Governor has :

"no objection to sending out a further circular to the Native Commissioners, making these points quite clear, and putting it beyond doubt that the object of his policy is not compulsion to work for white employers, but only the discouragement of idleness. He also made clear to us that his policy in this respect was only part of a general policy of improving labour conditions so as to make work more attractive to the Natives."

We are glad to learn that such instructions are to be issued, and should be obliged if we might have a copy of them in due course. We beg also to ask that the safeguards suggested by our Committee, both with regard to Administrative "advice" in the interests of private employers, and to "compulsion" for Public Works, may be included in the new instructions when they are issued.

In the "Model Mandate" which the Society submitted to the Commission on Mandates, the following passage was inserted upon the collective recommendation of several eminent Colonial Administrators :—

"The Mandatory Power agrees to prohibit any recruiting, official or private, of labour from the mandated areas, for purposes outside those areas."

This passage was inserted because it was felt that any attempt by the Mandatory Power to recruit labour for its individual advantage elsewhere would strike at the very root of the principle of Trusteeship, which is, in turn, the basis of the Mandatory system.

The Committee has read with much concern the declared Official intention of making "constant endeavours" to obtain native labour from the "adjacent conquered territory." This declared intention, and the phrasing of the circular, is so out of harmony with the conception and spirit of the League of Nations that we beg leave to ask whether His Majesty's Government proposes to advise the withdrawal of this passage from any instructions sent to Officials in British East Africa?

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